

Fiscal Yin, monetary Yang



MARGINAL UTILITY
TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

Earlier this week I wrote an article saying the next government's biggest problem is going to be money. In that context, here's a question that India's economists need to answer: How is it that in an era of utter fiscal dominance, India has more monetary policy experts than fiscal policy ones? Why has public finance been relegated to the backbench?

One answer, of course, is that monetary policy is more "sexy". Another is that a really thorough analysis of public finances of the Indian union, of the sort the Finance Commissions do, requires more work. A third is that our US-trained economists follow the American intellectual fashion, which is obsessed with the bond markets.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive. But their effect is the same — a paucity of public finance experts, especially theorists.

The result is that our economists have no answer — beyond the usual off-the-shelf ones — to a question that has haunted all democratic countries after 1945: How will governments meet their ever-increasing expenditures?

I have trawled through a lot of what has been published on Indian public finances. Amongst the star Indian economists, Partho Shome tried his hardest and best.

But in the end even he wasn't able to square the politics-economics circle. His analysis is technically perfect but doesn't factor in either politics or politicians or voters. It is like Wall Street without the bond market, or making sambhar without tamarind.

The National Institute of Public Finance and Policy does a lot of trends research. But it yields little by way of new and practicable ideas and the analysis is mostly lacking in any theoretical background and often no more than a description of the tables.

The Reserve Bank of India also makes an attempt. But it doesn't have an A-team for public finance. Understandably its focus is on the impact of fiscal policy on monetary policy.

The 14th Finance Commission did try to push the envelope a little. But it was constrained by the orthodoxy of its staff. So it stuck to the reduction of subsidies, salaries, pensions and interest payments format.

But howsoever desirable, this isn't going to happen. Instead we will see the opposite in the coming years.

Much of the rest of the meagre literature comprises mind-numbing analysis of revenue and expenditure trends. It gets us no closer to a practical solution.

In sum, at least in my not-so-humble opinion, all the analyses establish just one thing: We simply have no idea what we are going to do in the next decade and more. An era of fiscal pessimism is setting in, which, if not countered intellectually, is going to have the same effect as export pessimism has had.

We may simply end up letting the government forage for revenue as best as it can.

Yin and Yang

Fiscal policy serves voters while monetary policy serves the bond markets. The overlap is minuscule.

Monetary policy attempts to rein in governments so that the bond markets can bloom, at the cost of the voter. Fiscal policy seeks to do the opposite, which is why, in spite of all the exhortations, a long-term bond market refuses to be born in India.

I believe that the game has been set up wrongly so that the emphasis is on the zero-sum, non-cooperative aspects of it. Economists now need to devise a new, cooperative model in which the complementary aspects of Yin and Yang two are emphasised.

The first move in this direction has to be a purely intellectual one, in the way Keynes' was. He proposed a specific solution to a specific problem but dressed it in theory's plumage.

But it also contained the seeds of the current zero-sum problem. That is why, after 1945, politicians the world over generalised it so easily.

But alas the clock cannot be turned back very easily now. It is impossible to revert to a pre-1945, non-interventionist state.

The irony is that India had pretty much solved the problem as far back as 1955 when B K Nehru persuaded C D Deshmukh's RBI to give the government weekly overdrafts via the much-reviled ad hoc treasury bills. This system worked perfectly well till Rajiv Gandhi misread L K Jha's prescription for higher budget deficits and made a massive fiscal mess, which led to the crisis of 1991, which led to the abolition of the ad hoc.

It was, in my view, a self-goal. Now the time has come either to revive them in some limited way or to replace them with an equivalent. The first step in this direction has to be a new theory.

Conversations with friends

If the mood in the BJP before Pulwama was not particularly cheerful, now party leaders say all losses have been offset



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

A chance meeting with a friend in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led to valuable insights into what the party is thinking and how it is preparing for the election now that the war with Pakistan has been won and is (more or less) over, notwithstanding Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assertion that "ek ek ko maroonga; ghar mein ghus ke maroonga" a la George Bush ("we'll smoke them out").

The mood in the BJP before Pulwama was not particularly cheerful. The party had lost

assembly elections and more important, incumbent governments. True, the Congress victory was wafer thin (except in Chhattisgarh), but two governments had just slipped away from BJP hands. At several fora, including in Parliament lobbies, junior ministers were spotted muttering: "haareng, haareng" (we're going to lose) and even trusted alliance partners could be heard mocking the idea of a 'new' India outlined in the government-scripted President's address.

Worse, an internal survey by a section of the BJP had thrown up extremely dismaying conclusions: The BJP would get around 164 seats out of 545, the Congress would end up at around 120 and the party would face an existential crisis. The calculation was that the BJP would have to compromise by going easy on Jaganmohan Reddy of the YSR Congress, Naveen Patnaik of the Biju Janata Dal (offering a Padma Shri to his sister Gita Mehta was part of that plan; she turned it down) and K Chandrashekar Rao of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS). Around 45 seats netted from the eventual support of these regional parties would come to the BJP's aid. Overall, it wasn't looking too good.

In moments of candour, Modi is said to

have told colleagues: "Mujhe ishwareya varadaan mila hua hai" (I am blessed by His grace). The fact that Pulwama happened was one such divine intervention, party leaders say. Now, they say, the situation has been completely reversed. The country believes it is in safe hands, losses and deaths have been avenged and if necessary, India can do it again.

Armed with this discourse, vastly relieved party workers are glossing over what are clear and structural weaknesses: The party's loss of credibility in Delhi (seven Lok Sabha seats) for instance or its inability to expand the party's appeal in both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (42 seats together). In the Telangana assembly election, for instance, the BJP's strength came down from five seats to one. In compromising with Naveen Patnaik, it would have had to put the brakes on its own growth in Odisha, a state which it believes is ripe for the picking. It would have done so, but in bad grace.

Now, all that has changed. With serene confidence, leaders say all losses have been offset. "I can't put a figure to the seats BJP will get because I don't know where the number will stop", stated one, matter of fact, without a trace of bravado.

So, if the BJP is so sure it is return to pow-

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ PARESH MAITY | ARTIST

Tamluk to T-3

Maity tells Pavan Lall that his journey from small town Bengal to the homes of the rich and famous took a regimen that included painting something every single day of his life

It was actually *samosas*," artist Pares Maity tells me in a soft, Bengali-accented tone, recalling his motivation to attend a sit-and-draw painting contest at a local municipal hall when he was still in seventh grade at Hamilton High School. It wasn't cash or honours, it was the free snacks that got the attention of a hungry boy. But the thing was, he had competition. Because 199 other students also threw their hats in the ring and when their work went on display, Maity flatly says, he was shocked. "My painting was the worst of them all." He became a laughing stock among friends. "It was a turning point, and I decided I would be the best when I paint the next time," he says.

Between then and college, he ran away from home, went to Delhi for a couple months, hit the hippie trail, lived with craftsmen on what was almost skid row before returning to Kolkata. Later, he went on to study art at the Government College of Art & Craft in Kolkata honing his skills on what he had seen during his childhood: serene rivers, lush green fields, boatmen and skies set ablaze with the sun and its reflection. Forty years later, Maity is one of the best-known modern artists nationwide with works featured across most major landmarks and part of the collections of the rich and famous.

We've settled in at Thai Pavilion, Taj Vivanta, a downtown favourite among lawyers, corporates and everyone who lives in south Mumbai, to find out how that journey progressed. Maity, a shy, spectacled middle-aged man, is wearing a beret, electric blue pants and a navy jacket. Over his T-shirt he's draped a signature silver necklace, a crudely fashioned medallion with a lion engraved on it, picked up off the street. As one of six children of a government clerk, Maity neither

had a parental role model nor inspiration for his chosen vocation. On the contrary, it was rebellion against a paternal push to become an engineer or a doctor that led him to flee home to follow his heart — to create images nurtured while watching idol-makers in Tamluk at work during festive seasons.

Our waiter arrives and we pick vegetarian pad thai noodles along with stir fried Thai vegetables and a red Thai chicken curry that Maity selects after quizzing the waiter on whether it's more fiery than the green version. He is told green is spicier. At weddings he is asked to pose for selfies and in Kolkata, real estate companies feature billboards and hoardings with him. Does Maity, whose father wouldn't let him step out of the house after 5 pm, ever wonder how he made the leap to fame and fortune?

The truth is, Maity says, he doesn't think about it but that the early years were so harsh he can't escape their influence. He actually forged his father's signature to fill out an admission form to go to art college, and when he was accepted he travelled some 200 km every day to the campus and back. "Eight hours on the road every day was like living theatre, and in six years, I was never absent for a single day." When in college often ate *jhaal moori* or puffed rice with condiments for lunch.

While his prowess as a water colourist speaks for itself, some events fell in place to catapult him to fame. The first one was before solo auctions, when he stayed as a paying guest (for ₹800 a month) in the corridor of a Parsi home belonging to two sisters in Kolkata's Bow Bazaar area. He learned discipline as well as speaking a little Parsi and became friends with journalist CR Irani, who later became editor of *The Statesman* and would also camp there from time to time. In 1982 he sold three water colours — 20 inches

by 30 inches — to a gallery opposite the Park Hotel in Kolkata for ₹75 each. Then in the late 80's, journalist Pritish Nandy did a cover story for the *Illustrated Weekly*, which featured him sitting on a boat in a river. "That did a lot for me and the whole art scene," Maity says.

After that, Tina Ambani's Harmony Art Foundation which created a platform for artists and organised exhibitions frequently also gave Maity a platform that allowed him to showcase his works before an audience with deep pockets. Today, Maity's water colours, 20 inches by 30 inches, go for ₹7-8 lakh each.

He's even displayed at public landmarks: an 800-foot painting at the T-3 terminal at New Delhi Airport, a nine-foot water colour at St. Regis Hotel in Mumbai, another at the Taj Santa Cruz, more in Cecil hotel in Simla, the Oberoi Hotel in Bengaluru, the Oberoi Raj Vilas in Jaipur, and several more across the Leela hotels in Chennai, New Delhi and Bengaluru. Visit any prominent business leader's home and there's a Maity on display. In part that's because his work is easy to find. The second is that his themes are safe, generally understood by most, which means it's easier to appreciate.

The perception then would be that Maity is also an unabashed marketing machine. "I'm no fancy showman. In fact, I'm happy sitting on the floor and eating, and am very conscious that I am from a very poor and underprivileged background, and I am okay to be that way until the end," he says. He's not lying. He had no electricity at home till he was 19. Which is why the kerosene lantern features in so many of his works. "I owned one pair of trousers, and would wash them when I returned at night and dried them and wore them again the next morning." Be that as it may, Maity knows

er, what are the changes we should expect to see?

The answers were interesting. If in the last round of government formation it was Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's influence that was palpable and visible, this time, it will be Amit Shah whose voice will count the most in deciding who should be minister. "Some ministers who are judged to have performed well will be repeated. You will most certainly find Piyush Goyal in the government. But there will be a large number of new faces — people you haven't even heard of", my friend said. The model will be the appointments in Haryana and Maharashtra: M L Khattar hadn't ever been an MLA and he was made chief minister of Haryana; and Devendra Fadnavis was not the first name that came to mind in BJP politics in Maharashtra but he was given the top job in the state. In other words, people who will take a long, long time to become political stalwarts (and threats).

What about existing political stalwarts? Party President Amit Shah might find himself in government and two names are being considered as his replacement: Roads minister Nitin Gadkari; and former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. My friend was quick to introduce the inevitable caveat: that in this regime, barring two people, nobody really knows anything.

But what about the problems India was facing: farm distress, lack of jobs, artificial and uneven growth? His response was an evocative gesture. He shrugged.

Indian Art Gallery in Mumbai.

Some critics say Maity's work is limited to two broad styles that range between tranquil but lavish landscapes and cubist images of men and women almost always in opulent reds, yellows and blues, and is devoid of other styles that include, pointillism, impressionism, or figures. "To that Maity says his style "is what it is". By his own admission, his major influences have been the colours of Rajasthan, Picasso's cubism, and English painters JMW Turner and John Constable's landscapes. He acknowledges his Indian brethren referring to the "deeply respected Paritosh Sen", and the "brilliant abstract minimalism of Jagdish Swaminathan". However, one may say he's still on his way to joining that hallowed trio of Indian art rock stars: MF Husain, VS Gaitonde and SH Raza. Of course, they're also all dead and Maity is still relatively young, with at least a decade or two of work still left in him. He's already toyed with different styles — work in monochrome, a rendition of Gandhi's Salt March and so on. Water colours are no easy medium either, there's no second chance with fixed areas if you go wrong, which is less true of oils or pastels. Even so, Maity tells me, he's looking at producing an entirely different collection.

Our plates are empty and we've both done justice to our meal. Is there room for dessert, a waiter asks. Maity says he would like to try the water chestnuts in coconut milk only if there is no sugar in it but it is premixed so we skip it.

In September last year he went to Gullin in southern China, where he spent a few weeks in the countryside, watching ducks in rivers and absorbing the "mystical quality of that part of the world". The works from that trip will be minimalist and it is clearly a leap he knows he has to make. As when Raza found expression in the cosmic Bindu, he simply stopped doing the expressionist landscapes that he had done for years. Or when Husain moved on from horses to other subjects. Like the exact moment a stock market shifts, it's not a time one can predict but knows when it's happening. Until then, Maity says, "I will remain unhappy inside because of a constant quest to create something I haven't been able to do yet". That may well be the driving force that has, and will keep him going.

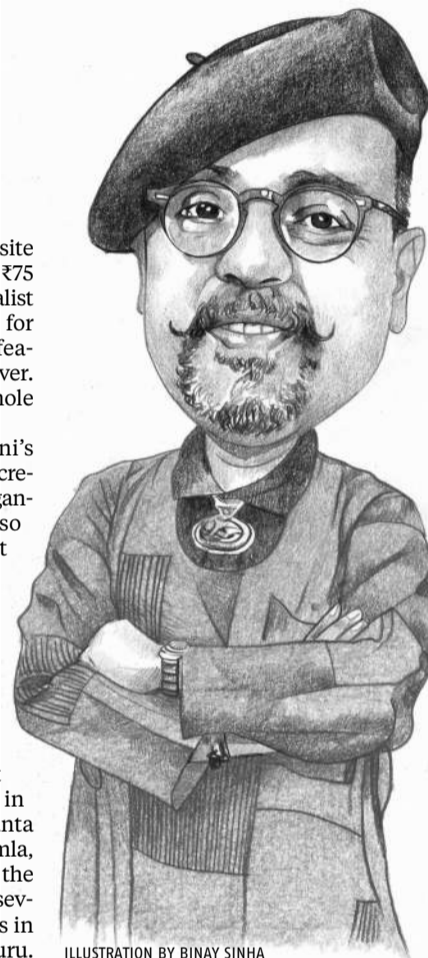


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

he's arrived but stays rooted by returning home every so often. "I visit Tamluk 10 times a year." His mother and siblings still live there.

Our lunch arrives, fragrant and as colorful as one of Maity's landscapes. We settle into the fare, which tastes as good as it looks. "How's the red curry", I ask, and get a "glorious" from Maity, who uses that word a lot. The noodles and vegetables are on the mark, and we settle into a long silence as we eat. For someone as prolific as he is — 80 solo exhibitions — it's surprising that there isn't a massive team backing Maity up. "I have no secretary, no team, no marketing, no administration — all that is done by my galleries," he says. Those include CIMA in Kolkata, Sumukha in Bengaluru, Art Alive in Delhi, and the Institute of Contemporary

Stragglers in Swachh Bharat



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

As we wait for the dates of the Lok Sabha election to be announced, it's increasingly becoming harder to separate fact from fiction; truth from exaggeration. Take the findings of the recently-out second edition of National Annual Rural Sanitation Survey (NARSS) 2018-19. It has found that 93.1 per cent of rural Indian households now have access to toilets — and 96.5 per cent of these are in constant use. My experiences in the field tell me otherwise: You can give a person a toilet, but getting him/her to use it is another matter. Which is why in the frenetic race to declare the entire country "open defecation-free", I find the stories of the stragglers and the false starters

instructive. For they tell us that instead of declaring the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* an unmitigated success, the focus should be on what more needs to be done.

In mid-February, I visited Barabanki near Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. None of the villagers I met who had toilets, used them regularly. This column had elaborated the reasons people gave for not using them — ranging from not wanting their septic tanks to fill up too fast (which was absurd as most toilets I saw were the twin-pit composting type) to enjoying the answering of nature's calls in the lap of nature.

A week later, a similar picture presented itself to me in Bhadrak, Odisha. Almost every household I visited had a toilet, or access to one. To say that none of them was being used at all would be incorrect. I met 27-year-old Sukumari Behera in Gobindpur village whose husband had built a toilet for her as a wedding gift. It had turned out to be, she said, a godsend, especially as local tradition dictates that young women should not step out of their houses for at least two years after marriage. Also, after years of the daily ignominy of walking one to two kilometers in the fields to defecate, the toilet transformed her life.

To say, however, that every member of every household who had a toilet, was

exclusively using that would be equally incorrect. Her neighbour septuagenarian Hemalata Behera had a toilet for three years — but had never used it. "I'm scared to use it as it is very dark," she said. It turned out that most toilets in the village had no electricity. Toddlers, I saw, rarely wore any lower garments here. "This way, little children can relieve themselves whenever they like, wherever they are," said Savitri Malahik, a mother. So other than young women who routinely used the toilet for reasons of modesty, or the elderly, who weren't able to walk far into the fields, I found most others rarely used toilets.

These field findings match the 2018 study by Research Institute for Compassionate Economics and Centre for Policy Research, which found that across rural Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, 23 per cent of people who have a toilet continue to defecate in the open.

Maybe we need better-designed and more conveniently located toilets. Maybe we need to ensure that at least all children learn to use toilets exclusively. Whatever we do, we can't keep building toilets all over the countryside without understanding why they're not being used.

When will Spring be over?



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

Delhi's brief flirtation with spring is underway. Pink frangipanis are in blossom, and gardens are a riotous spill of daisies, poppies, pansies and phlox, blooming under the watchful gaze of hollyhocks and sweet peas. Prize dahlias are brazening out their weight with the support of helpful sticks provided by vigilant gardeners. The chrysanthemums haven't yet withered away, while velvety coxcombs are holding their own amidst a blaze of hydrangeas. The flame-of-the-forest is basking in its unabashed glory on trees shorn of all leaves, flowering ahead of Holi. The air is lightly perfumed, the sun is out, the temperature is mild, recalling to mind

Nancy Sinatra's *Summer Wine*.

This is perfect all fresco weather, a brief month when the weather is ideal for sitting out amidst garden bowers with a glass of bubbly and something to nibble alongside. The few Delhi restaurants or cocktail lounges that have outdoor seating are making the most of it — and well they might, if those AWOL from offices are anything to go by. Absenteeism has shot up manifold because of mysterious illnesses that seem to ebb and flow by the day, coinciding with a spurt in the F&B business. Coincidence? Go figure.

If Delhi parties have shifted gear from late-night revels to afternoon soirees, this is the perfect time for leisurely days spent in the company of friends over lazy brunches that begin well past lunchtime and turn into sundowners before you know it. Most end with dinner — as early or as late as you choose to make it. It taxes the host to plan a menu that's suitable for any time of the day, or night — but given sufficient liquid inducements, even the most sophisticated Dilliwallah will settle for *anda-paratha* sans any snobbery. The rest is mere window dressing.

Gin is back — after decades — as the spirit most popular with the millennials. Served with a dash of tonic, a slice of cucumber, or any of several ingenious

ways devised by bar curators, it's replaced vodka, white rum and other spirits that commanded the cocktail circuit till some while ago. Robust looking men think little of nursing their G&Ts in full view, having improved its image from effeminate to swinging in just one short season. Punch is enjoying a rerun too. But don't waste your time on wine unless it's the best your money can buy. And chances are, as the sun begins its peekaboo beyond the horizon, someone will order a round of shots, and another, and another.

With the weather colouring one's mood, can love be far behind, even for the jaded? Public displays of affection — a Western malaise, surely? — are proving a tad embarrassing for observers (the observed are oblivious). The malls are full of people walking hand in hand. The shops are populated by people for no reason other than they are happy. Those fortunate to own sports cars have been spotted driving with their tops down (alas, the traffic is a killjoy). It would be better, of course, if all this romancing was not at someone else's expense. The driver's taken the day off, the cleaning lady appears distracted, the cook's mooning about on the terrace instead of laying food on the table, making me wish self-ishly for spring to be done and dusted — so my life, at least, can return to normal.

Campaign silences

Earlier this week, Rahul Gandhi, accompanied by his mother and Manmohan Singh, met the ambassadors of the G20 countries over lunch. The ambassadors cannot be blamed for having expected a formal statement by Mr Gandhi on his approach to foreign policy. All they got was polite chitchat as the Congress president circulated from one table to the next. Waste of time, said one diplomat present. Missed opportunity, said another.

If, by general consent, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has regained lost ground since the Bharatiya Janata Party's poor showing in the state elections of November-December, one reason has to be the failure of the opposition to say what they stand for, even as Mr Modi's government has ramped up its flow of full-page advertisements listing sundry achievements (the Aam Aadmi Party has been doing the same in Delhi to mark its fourth anniversary in office). Mr Modi has also got away, unchallenged, when he has claimed repeatedly that nothing happened before his government took charge. Indeed, the Congress has been a bystander while the BJP has appropriated Congress stalwarts from the past like Subhas Chandra Bose and Vallabhbhai Patel, even Mahatma Gandhi.

What Mr Gandhi has done so far is to attack Mr Modi on a variety of issues, but his barbs have not been even remotely as effective as the old retort about a "suit-boot sarkar". The Rafale accusations have been blunted by the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General, which conveniently failed to include in its calculations the cost of the sovereign guarantee foregone. The business of Mr Modi being a *chor* or thief cuts no ice because (unlike Bofors) there is not even a hint of a money trail. Worse, any fool would know that tackling Mr Modi on a national security platform, in the wake of Pulwama-Balakot, is like playing Rafael Nadal on clay. Wisdom would have suggested getting back as quickly as possible to the farmer distress-lack of jobs platform that had Mr Modi on the defensive.

The fact is that, for all its failures (for which it got voted out), the Manmohan Singh government had significant achievements to show. In the wake of the BJP campaign that the impossible has been made possible (*Namumkin ab mumkin hai*), it would have been an obvious gambit for Mr Gandhi to remind voters that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance delivered in the past, and to assert that it can deliver again. In case he needs reminding, the UPA's achievements included a dramatic drop in poverty at an unprecedented rate, doubling investment in infrastructure (as a percentage of GDP), new airports in all the major cities, enough power capacity for the first time to put an end to power shortages, a sharp decline in left-wing extremism by the end of UPA rule and a notably quieter Kashmir, record agricultural growth plus crop diversification, the Aadhaar initiative, empowering citizens through the law on the right to information, the rural employment guarantee programme, giving two million forest-dwellers their land rights under a new law, successfully tackling AIDS, and so on. Would reminding people of these achievements have helped the Congress to rebut that it is not just Mr Modi who delivers? If yes, why is Mr Gandhi as reticent on this as he was at the meeting with G20 ambassadors?

By general consensus, Mr Gandhi has emerged as a more serious politician after his initial, wrong-footing forays. Certainly, it took him a while to get serious about politics (having entered Parliament 15 years ago). For the last six years, he has been either vice-president or president of the Congress. But he has manifestly failed to re-build the party at the grassroots during this period, or throw up new leaders. Still, the Congress has begun to fare better in elections — state as well as by-elections — while the BJP's record in by-elections is just five of 13 seats that it originally held. But Mr Gandhi looks in danger of frittering away the momentum gifted to him by the government's mis-steps. That risk is compounded by critical failures in alliance formation, in both Delhi and the all-important Uttar Pradesh.

Long march to peace with Pakistan

India needs to invest in its military to scare Pakistan to peace and at the same time get Indians to understand the realities of war

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Kitney aadmi thehey (how many enemies were there), asked Gabbar Singh, the most feared yet adored villain of Hindi cinema, mocking his punch-drunk hitmen just back from a skirmish in Ramesh Sippy's 1975 classic *Sholay*.

Now, why am I using this in the context of last week's 90-hour India-Pakistan "war", or describing the nuttiness into which we have descended post-27 February, as 'Gabbarisation' of our politico-strategic discourse.

It is as if only three questions now remain: Did the bombs/missiles hit the Jaish facility or not? If they did, how many did they kill (hence, *kitney aadmi thehey*)? And the third: Did the IAF shoot down a PAF F-16 or not? These entirely miss the nub of the issue.

We had written two weeks back that revenge was an unwise strategic impulse. That revenge was for idiots, while the wise prefer dissuasion and deterrence. These three questions reflect a revenge mindset, unfortunate for a nation of our size, power and pretensions. It's the reason we call it "Gabbarised".

The prime minister himself has given fuel to it by thumping his chest and saying to cheering crowds that his nature (*fitrat*) is such that he cannot wait long to take revenge. It is a dangerous politicisation of strategic response. Our military wants surprise to be on its side, not predictability that the adversary can easily "game".

And second, it could be an admission that you do not think what you've done is enough to deter Pakistan. I may be over-interpreting campaign rhetoric. But rhetoric can also limit your options.

On the other hand, if the prime minister feels that these audacious strikes haven't produced deterrence, the new normal the subcontinent must prepare for is different from what is best for India. A cycle of terror-retribution-escalation-de-escalation is just two steps higher but no different than the completely wasteful blood-letting that's been going on across the Line of Control. The only difference is that instead of small arms, mortars, sniper rifles and commando-knives, fighter planes and smart munitions will be used. This is ready for defence nerds and teenagers. Unfortunately, it is also a strategic compromise if not defeat, as Lt. Gen. H.S. Panag (ret'd) argued in his very wise and brave article earlier this week.

Let's list the positives first. For the first time since this cycle of Pakistani-controlled terror-subversion began in Punjab (1981) and Kashmir (1989), India drew a line on its tolerance levels. In the past, provoc-

ations much graver than Pulwama, such as the Parliament attack and 26/11, had passed without retaliation. The Indian response had become predictable and the world was getting bored.

Direct retaliation now was the logical option. Pakistan has, therefore, been given three important messages at Balakot:

- That there is a threshold of tolerance beyond which India will strike deep inside the Pakistani mainland, unmindful of escalation. To that extent, Pakistan's post-1990 nuclear bluff has been dented. It isn't over, but Pakistan now has to factor in this new reality.
- That India has the muscle to

carry out such reprisals and the ability to maintain operational secrecy.

- And third, that the key powers of the world now accept India's right to retaliate. It follows that India is subsequently expected to behave responsibly and, point made, should avoid getting caught in a retaliatory cycle.

This is how the game played out this time. But we should also count the negatives. So here again, the rule of three examples:

- The strikes, counter-strikes and Indian response exposed the inadequacy of conventional asymmetry between India and Pakistan. In terms of technology, weaponry and capability, the two sides are about evenly matched if the engagements are episodic. In a longer war of attrition, India will outlast Pakistan. In short, India has conventional superiority to ultimately prevail over Pakistan, but not for punitive domination.
- A fast-developing situation like this needs great



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Pulwama but as the successful taming of Pakistan. As the post-Pulwama backlash against Kashmiris grew his words of balm were: "Children of Kashmir are suffering because of terrorists...They are standing with us to eliminate (terrorists) and we need them." Some of his utterances have been off-colour — terming the captured wing commander "a pilot project" or distinctly off the mark — the claim that India would have been more effective if we had the Rafale aircraft.

Will this have a cumulative influence on more than 800 million voters in a few weeks' time? The election story is bound to change; the question how much? Prior to Pulwama the BJP appeared to be on the defensive, uncertain of its stop-and-go development programmes, fearful of growing discontent among agriculturists and unemployed youth, and nervous of gathering steam among Opposition parties across regional and caste alliances.

On a packed Jaipur-Delhi flight some days before Pulwama, I happened to sit next to Haryana chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar (in a back seat and mildly surprised that he refused to occupy Row A). Although he defended his party's proficiency in conducting door-to-door campaigns he was silent when a woman passenger sharply asked, "Chief Minister sahib, what was the need to change Gurgaon's name to Gurugram?"

Today, he would be aggressively cock-a-hoop as the BJP leadership goes into battle to reap the benefits of Pulwama-Balakot and woo the electorate to jump on the nationalist bandwagon. *Sab kuch mumkin hai* (Everything is possible).

an enemy of India.

The prime minister's 'enemies within' dog whistle — said at a media conclave — is echoed by people like 'Sadhguru' Jaggi Vasudev. Mr Modi's dramatic "*ghar mein ghush ghush kar maareng*" (we will enter each of their homes and kill them) was about terrorists, but after five years of hate speech, it's barely any distance at all between that and what the BJP's Ram Madhav suggested in an op-ed — that bringing traitors to justice is a public duty. Madhav wrote that it was "up to the rest of the country — its leadership and people alike" to change the narrative — if a Kashmiri "is misguided, lead him; if he is mischievous, punish him; if he is treacherous, banish him. But instill India in him."

Five years of hate speech empowers BJP MLA Kapil Mishra to put out a video calling for people to drag 'traitors' out of their homes and causes the violent persecution of Kashmiri students, the assault of Kashmiri street sellers in Lucknow, and the thrashing of a Muslim student who questioned the government's claims.

So five years down the line, the BJP-RSS has at least partly achieved what it really wants to achieve: To infect the public and the public discourse with an inchoate sense that Muslims are terrorists and traitors, and that Hindus who oppose a Hindu Rashtira too are suspect.

Do you recognise your country? We got to this point by incrementally letting the crazy become the norm. The BJP's 2019 election slogan "*Namumkin ab mumkin hai*" — "The impossible is now possible" — is perfect like that, horribly so.

The nationalist bandwagon



AL FRESCO

SUNIL SETHI

The fraught fortnight of February that raised India-Pakistan hostilities to fever pitch may have subsided but their effects won't easily go away. They are now the central focus of Narendra Modi's election campaign as he galvanises nationalist fervour during breathless nationwide tours. Gone is the development-for-all promise of "*Sabka saath, sabka vikas*" underpinned by a plea to voters of "*Ab ki baar, Modi sarkar*" that swept the Bharatiya Janata Party to power in 2014 with an unprecedented mandate. In an avalanche of advertising aimed at winning hearts and minds the new slogan is "*Namumkin ab mumkin hai*" (The impossible is now possible) — a line as vague as its dream of la-la land.

What happened to the all-consuming issues of spiralling joblessness, farmers' distress, the lingering pain of demonetisation

and the Goods and Services Tax, and the alleged corruption in the Rafale aircraft deal? They are off the BJP's radar; as to the persisting thorn in its flesh of the Rafale deal, the government's overbearing response has been to try suppressing *The Hindu's* investigations under the Official Secrets Act.

Between Pulwama and the heralded return of fighter pilot Abhinandan Varthaman, came the Balakot air strikes, an event now obscured in a miasma of lies or half-truths. Only future historians will tell us how many died in the Jaish-e-Muhammad terrorist camps — "a very large number," as the foreign secretary said, or 250 as BJP president Amit Shah claims, or 300 as some of the clairvoyant media — firmly aboard the nationalist bandwagon — repeatedly announced. Swathes of the media, cocooned by the anonymity of unnamed sources, have had a field day. Balakot remains, in Churchill's wartime phrase, "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."

Whatever the amount of ammunition India dropped inside the LoC, it spent a great deal of ballast in mustering international support to blackball Pakistan's furtive provocations in Kashmir. Whereas much of the democratic world unanimously condemned Pakistan as the home base of jihadi terrorism, the glow of India's "guest of honour" invitation to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's summit in Abu Dhabi — and Pakistan's ensuing protest — was dulled by its insistence on drumming up Kashmir and Indian atrocities in the Valley.

The OIC is a 57-member oil-rich club with each country holding the right of veto; not much gets done without its call to Muslim brethren and distributing largesse among the faithful. A few days after Pulwama, Saudi Arabia's sinister strongman Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman landed in Pakistan with a no-strings-attached gift of \$20 billion, the first, he said, of a package that will "grow each month and every year". Imran Khan drove him personally to his official residence. Oil-dependent India, with nearly three times as many Indian workers in Saudi as Pakistan, also welcomed "MBS" warmly.

But if OIC leaders equivocate with cash injections to pep up Pakistan's failed economy, China, its other patron and exacting money-lender, has impassively sat on the fence during the Pulwama-Balakot face-off.

The inescapable fact is that, like Lady Macbeth's "damned spot", the blood stains in Kashmir show no sign of vanishing. According to Ajai Shukla in *Business Standard*, 45 military personnel, including the 40 in Pulwama, have already died in the first two months of 2019—that is already half the number of 90 in all of 2018. The number of terrorists "neutralised" may have doubled since 2014—the year the BJP came to power—but civilian deaths have tripled — from 28 in 2014 to 86 in 2018.

In the surge of election rhetoric, however, the Balakot narrative is being projected by Mr Modi as not only a triumphant vindication of

Impossible is now horribly possible



INTER ALIA

MITALI SARAN

Language matters; it shapes thought. In 2014, the BJP-RSS combine's political language focused on allaying fears that it would be antagonistic towards minorities. Despite its unshakable commitment to creating a supremacist Hindu Rashtira, millions of Indians chose to believe the government when it said that it was all about "*Sabka saath, sabka vikas*" and "*achhe din*". Perhaps they desperately wanted it to be true.

However, the Modi *sarkar* swiftly reverted to type, wrapping bigotry and chauvinism in hyper-nationalism. When JNU students were branded 'anti-national', the whole country was suddenly using the term as if it is perfectly normal to accuse people of such a thing. The Radio Rwanda-style television channel Republic made "*Tukde tukde gang*" household slang for dissenters, and the BJP IT Cell ampli-

fied slurs, calling uncooperative media 'dalals', 'news traders' (credit to the Prime Minister) and 'presstitutes' (credit to General V K Singh) and dissenting intellectuals 'irrelevant' or 'intellectually corrupt'. Social media was awash with terms like 'jihadi', 'dynasty slave', 'bootlicker', 'looter', and 'burnol'.

This language normalises the idea that criticism is not — cannot be — independent-minded, but only ever motivated by some imaginary vileness, be it slavish devotion to the opposition, or disgruntlement about lost privilege, or sedition designed to 'break India'.

When people objected to cattle-related lynchings and anti-minority violence, they were called 'Hindu-hating' and 'anti-Hindu'. That language feeds nicely into the RSS's emotional foundation of Hindu victimhood and grievance, which the BJP leadership's constant talk of '1.25 crore Indians' seeks to project on to all Indians (read: Hindus), be it about the Ram temple or support of the armed forces.

This is the rhetorical foundation of majoritarianism: If you talk about the place as a monolithic Hindu supremacist country for long enough, it will eventually become one. Because language matters.

Today, with widespread dissatisfaction over the jobs crisis, agricultural distress, an economic slowdown, crony capitalism and lousy law and order, 'nationalist' language has become even more fervid and purple,

communication planning with your own people, media and the world. The Modi government has done poorly on this.

■ As with the Kandahar hijack, Indian public opinion again proved to be the weak link. The same public that clamours for a decisive all-out war, or "*aar-paar ki ladayi*", lost its nerve with just one PoW in Pakistani custody. By the evening of the air skirmish, "punish or crush Pakistan" type hashtags had been replaced by "Bring Back Abhinandan". Fed the easy jingoism of *Uri*-style movies, the Indian public has forgotten that in real war both sides take losses. And sometimes setbacks too.

In short, this crisis taught India that to embark on a new, low-tolerance, punitive approach towards Pakistan on terror, it has a long way to go militarily and temperamentally. India's leaders, therefore, have to invest money to achieve the first, and emotion in the second. This kind of a cycle can play out maybe once more, or at the most twice. History won't take a vacation then and Pakistani conduct won't so easily reform.

In fact, if this is the new normal, Pakistan and the international community will get used to it. I strike, you retaliate, then I retaliate and we go home at some point. Then we both declare victory to our respective populations, who love their armed forces far too much not to believe it.

India needs to first make its people understand what war is. Too many are brainwashed watching the footage of American air and drone strikes, where they have total control of the skies. Or movies stirring but so idiotic they have to invent capers straight out of some old "*Vijay Jasoos*" type pulp to conjure up "gadgets" like *Uri's* "garud". Real-life fighting isn't a walk through a Hamley's toy shop.

Even if your soldiers are Sunny Deol and Vicky Kaushal, Pakistanis are no Johnny Walkers. They too are tough fighting soldiers, children of the same soil. The one lot who never takes them lightly is India's professional soldiers. That's why they keep winning the real wars. It is for the leaders to drum this also into their people's heads. But if all they do is exploit the forces for their jingoistic politics, strut about in camouflage fatigues and trivialise the military, they are being unwise.

Finally, to have dissuasive, deterrent strategy is a great idea. It is also imperative. But this would need a punitive ability that also dissuades Pakistan from retaliating. Otherwise you are prepared for a new, sub-nuclear mutual deterrence. India tells Pakistan you will ultimately lose a war of attrition, and Pakistan says, militarily, maybe. But economically the stakes are much higher for you.

Here's one way out. Up your defence budget to a fixed 2 per cent of a rising GDP. Just that it adds about 25 per cent to our current defence spending. Reform the forces. Gen. Bipin Rawat has a great plan for the Army, for example. Optimise them for conventional and decisive punitive deterrence. Throw the gauntlet at Pakistan. They will calm down, or pauperise themselves catching up. It might just make them rethink from their brains for once as they tie up their \$12 billion IMF bailout. Remember, the best militaries are ones so powerful and dominant that you do not have to use them. India can afford to have one such.

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Natural selection in verbs

EYE CULTURE

KUMAR ABISHEK

Recently at a friend's place, I encountered *Beowulf*, an Old English epic poem written probably between the 8th century and the 11th century. Understanding it was tough, even with translations — and tougher for someone like me who would rather read a graphic novel (and I do not mean children comics) than diving into classic or modern literature.

I failed miserably, but the arduous 20-minute journey into *Beowulf* sparked a curiosity: Why words either evolve or get lost? Why words like "swele (also)" and "findan (to find)" don't exist anymore? Well, that research is still on (much simpler: I am bored and taken over by another idea). Why verbs get lost/evolve? Why it's "helped" and not "holp", as in ancient times?

By the way, did you know English alphabets had way more than 26 letters and "W" wasn't one of them, and that "&" is not a symbol but an ancient alphabet like "3" (not the number but which stood for "gh")? Or that "hallux" is the anatomical name for the toe? I knew the latter, I forgot and I re-discovered — the first two steps of the process are fairly common with verbs, though the last is an exception, not a rule.

To understand why we lost certain verbs or words, a guide into Zipf's law, proposed by linguist George K Zipf, would be necessary. He states that given a large sample of words, the frequency of any word is inversely proportional to its rank on the frequency table (a word "x" will have a frequency proportional to 1/x). Or, the most frequent word will occur about twice as often as the second most popular word, and so on.

For example, according to a study of the *Brown Corpus*, or the *Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-Day American English*, which has slightly over a million words, "the" was the most frequent, nearly 7 per cent of all word occurrences (69,971 times), followed by "of" 3.5 per cent (36,411 times). Only 135 vocabulary items were needed to account for half the *Brown Corpus*. And this shows that not all words are created equal; some are often used and many aren't.

Pretty much everything in languages follows Zipf's law, but irregular verbs. The most common verbs in English language are "be",

"have", "do", "say", "get", "make", "go", "know", "take", "see", "come" and "think" — all irregular (just a Google search is enough; almost all replies have the same pattern). There are only 200 irregular verbs in English in a vast world of regular verbs, but hardly any of these is uncommon. Had irregular verbs followed Zipf's law, only a few would have been common and the rest rarely used.

So why is this anomaly? Or, is it? It appears that irregular verbs are ancient ones, belonging to an around 5,000-year-old language called Proto Indo European, the forefather of both English and Hindi, and many other languages. In this language, the tense of a verb could have been changed by an alternation in the vowels of related word form (ablaut), like sing, sang, sung. But later, the speakers of Proto-Germanic, which evolved from Proto Indo European, started adding verbs, not following ablauts but by simply adding "t" or "ed". Actually, verbs like "sent" or "crashed" must have been actually irregular back then.

More and more verbs were added to the English language and generally, all of them changed tense using "t" and "ed". Also, many older verbs switched over to the new pattern like "slew" became "slayed". Since the *Beowulf*-era, three of every four verbs have been regularised. Though a few verbs went in reverse, like "haved" became "had" and "maked" transformed into "made".

Still, we have irregular verbs. Why? Researchers tracked down 177 irregular verbs since *Beowulf* was written, and found that 79 of them were regularised in Modern English. This study also suggested that most frequently used verbs usually stayed irregular and the rarely used became regular — natural selection after all.

So, irregular verbs are not exceptions to Zipf's law. Researchers have predicted that no-so-often used verb "sting" (used 10 times for every 100,000 verbs) would regularise in 700 years, and a verb like "drink" would take 5,000 years for such a process. They claim "wed", an irregular verb, is already in the process of becoming "wedded".

Oh! I completely *forgot* to end my nerdy monologue, which after adding a few words may become another source material for a study on Zipf's law. Thanks, *Beowulf*. And remember, "if we don't use it, we may lose it (courtesy, a science show on YouTube)".